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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

S E C R E T RABAT 000359

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/01/2009

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SUBJECT: GOM REFUGEE POLICY: LIMITED INTERNATIONAL
RESETTLEMENT OKAY PROVIDED IT'S LOW-KEY

Classified By: POL/C Timothy Lenderking for Reasons 1.4. (b) and (d)

1. (C) MFA Secretary General Omar Hilale told Polcouns February 22 that the GOM had "no objection" to an international refugee resettlement program out of Morocco provided it remained low-key, with as little media attention as possible to avoid attracting more would-be refugees to Morocco. He stated bluntly that any migrants identified by UNHCR as refugees were, in fact, "UNHCR's problem," and Morocco would not allow them to stay in the country. Morocco, moreover, would not extend any special protection to the refugees beyond facilitating their departure from Morocco through international resettlement. Agreeing to international resettlement involves "no legal recognition on our part" of their status in Morocco as refugees, Hilale stressed.

2. (C) Hilale, who was joined in the meeting by MFA Director of UN Affairs Nasser Bourita, commented he had just met with UNHCR Morocco Representative Johannes Van der Klauw that morning, and he believed the two had an agreement on Morocco's terms for establishing international resettlement. Polcouns noted that US Cairo-based regional refugee coordinator planned to visit Morocco the week of March 6 to explore international resettlement options with UNHCR, the GOM, and other potentially interested third countries (Note: UNHCR has scheduled a meeting on March 6 for visiting regional ref coord and numerous diplomatic missions that might be interested in small-scale resettlement out of Morocco). Polcouns walked Hilale through the planned visit, much of which UNHCR had already briefed him on. He welcomed the visit and appeared comfortable with the proposed program. (Hilale will meet with UNHCR and ref coord on March 3).

Better Relations with UNHCR

3. (C) Hilale noted that relations between UNHCR and the GOM had improved significantly in the last few months. Hilale said that prior to Van der Klauw's arrival, UNHCR was not screening applicants for refugee status carefully and was handing out refugee certificates willy nilly, including to

those who were clearly economic migrants. There was substantial documentation fraud, Hilale charged, and no attempt on UNHCR's part to "apply the rules." In addition to the avalanche of migrants into Morocco that led to assaults on the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in the fall of 2005, resulting in a dozen deaths, Hilali said the GOM was concerned about trafficking networks and possible terrorists taking advantage of the migrant explosion to move into and through Morocco. This was a potential security problem, he said. Morocco was concerned about terrorist cells and trafficking mafias mixing in with the migrants.

14. (C) Hilale said there were some 150 individuals that UNHCR identified as refugees from the many hundred of migrants they had interviewed up to now. The majority of the bona fide refugees were from eastern Congo and the Ivory Coast. As part of the low-key approach envisaged by Morocco, Hilale said the refugees should not be informed of their resettlement destinations until the last minute. Polcouns said he understood why Morocco would not want to become more of a magnet than it already was for migrants, but noted that there would have to be refugee screening and processing done by individual countries, and it was probably unrealistic if not illegal to keep the refugees in the dark until the last minute about where they would be resettled.

15. (C) Polcouns asked how the GOM intended to treat those migrants who did not qualify as refugees, in light of reports that some had been rounded up and dumped in the Western Sahara or on the Algerian border. Hilale said flatly that economic migrants cannot stay in Morocco. The GOM was working closely with several African embassies in Rabat, especially the Nigerian, to repatriate migrants voluntarily. The GOM felt this effort was working well and enjoyed the cooperation of the governments involved. Hilale said the

Nigerian government had specifically requested the support of Morocco in repatriating its nationals. Hilale said tougher border controls in Ceuta and Melilla had discouraged migrants from coming to Morocco, and for the time being the crisis of last fall had passed. Hilale said Algeria may have responded to some pressure from UNHCR and Europe to crack down on illegal transit, but there was "zero cooperation" on the migration issue between Morocco and Algeria. Hilale emphasized that the repatriations thus far had been voluntary

Asked about treatment of those who refused to return home, Hilale said he did not envision a massive round-up of migrants; if people remained under the radar screen and out of trouble, Hilale granted many would probably end up staying in Morocco regardless of Morocco's official policy. Whatever the situation, Hilale concluded, Morocco could not handle illegal migrants on its own, without political and financial help from Europe and the international community.

UNHCR's View

16. (C) During a February 24 meeting with poloffs to follow up on the Hilale meeting (septel), Van der Klauw agreed there was a "gentleman's agreement" with Hilale on Morocco's terms for conducting international resettlement, but Van der Klauw stressed he had made no guarantees to Hilale that UNHCR would resettle the whole refugee caseload -- only that he would try his best. Spain and Portugal, he said, had both taken small numbers of refugees from Morocco recently. He hoped such non-traditional resettlement countries could be induced to participate further in resettlement efforts, something he hoped to ascertain at the meeting on March 6. As to Morocco's handling of migrants not accorded refugee status, Van der Klauw was less sanguine in his view about their treatment at the hands of the Moroccan authorities.

Comment

17. (C) Morocco's homegrown, cut-and-dried refugee policy may be somewhat at odds with international refugee law, and naive as well in terms of Hilale's insistence that the resettlement

effort remain under wraps. Nevertheless, there is a good working relationship now between UNHCR and the MFA, and apparently frequent communication between the two offices, which will help the two navigate through some of the challenges that lie ahead. While we understand the US is open to resettling some of the refugee caseload from Morocco, we do recognize the pull factor for Morocco, and encourage UNHCR and the USG to do this without a lot of fanfare. We have little doubt that the GOM will reverse course quickly if they see an up-tick in illegal migrants and find themselves in the spotlight as they were with the border assaults in the fall.

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